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ABSTRACT

Learning disabled children fail to ask for clarification when they do not understand a speaker's message. Failure is due to factors inherent in the children themselves, such as difficulty with question forms, inability to monitor comprehension, and fear as well as poor instructional techniques. Specific teaching strategies can help improve the ability to request clarification by increasing students' facility with question forms and focusing on referential communication tasks, especially in conjunction with modeling and purposefully giving ambiguous directions. In addition, students need opportunities for practice. (Author/CL)

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REQUESTING CLARIFICATION:

THE NEGLECTED ASPECT OF LISTENING

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Abstract

L.D. children frequently fail to ask for clarification when they do not understand a speaker's message. Failure is due to factors inherent in the children themselves and poor instructional techniques. Specific teaching strategies can help improve the ability to request clarification.

Requesting Clarification: The Neglected Aspect of Listening

It is a well known fact that many children with learning disabilities have difficulty listening. Usually children with listening problems receive training in auditory discrimination, auditory memory, auditory figure ground, and following oral directions. One component of listening, the ability of the listener to ask the speaker for clarification, has been virtually ignored.

Listening is usually thought of as a receptive process rather than part of a dynamic interaction between a speaker and listener. An effective listener, however, is not passive. He processes what a speaker has said, checking the message to see if it corresponds with his previous knowledge of the subject. If he does not understand a message he requests clarification. He also requests clarification when he simply wants to see if he has understood correctly.

There are many learning disabled children who rarely ask for clarification. My purpose in this article is to explore some reasons why children refrain from asking for clarification and to suggest teaching strategies designed to increase children's ability to request clarification.

WHY CHILDREN FAIL TO ASK FOR CLARIFICATION

It is important to consider why children refrain from asking for clarification from an ecological point of view. Besides just looking at the characteristics or deficits in the children themselves, it is necessary to consider the nature of the interactions between children and teachers.

Problem with Question Forms

As a group, learning disabled children are less adept than their nonhandicapped peers in asking and responding to questions. They tend to use more immature question forms such as marking a question with rising intonation instead of inverting the word order and adding a modal (e.g., "Go out to recess↑" for "Can I go out to recess?"). Learning disabled children ask for clarification less frequently when given ambiguous descriptions (Donahue, Pearl, & Bryan, 1980), ask fewer open ended questions (Bryan, Donahue, Pearl & Strum, 1981) and have more difficulty responding to implicit requests for information (Kidder, 1980).

Comprehension Monitoring

Comprehension monitoring refers to the ability of an individual to assess his own level of understanding of an incoming message (Kotsonis & Patterson, 1980). A person processes a message to see if it makes sense to him. Young children are frequently not aware that they do not understand a message. They think they understand when in reality a message is ambiguous and incomprehensible. Clearly, children will not ask for clarification in such situations because they do not perceive a need for doing so. Requesting clarification is an overt sign that a person is monitoring his comprehension.

Investigators have purposefully given children inadequate or ambiguous messages to see how they would respond to such messages. Although the task requirements and materials have varied greatly from study to study general findings are that: (1) young children

have a difficult time recognizing ambiguous information and (2) the ability to detect ambiguous information develops with age (Markham, 1977, 1979; Asher, 1976; Bearison & Levy, 1977).

In addition, there are situations where children are aware that they do not understand a message but do not know what to do about their confusion. Patterson & Kister (1981) suggest that young children do not realize that the quality of a message affects the communication process and that the speaker may be at fault when a message is ambiguous. Young children have not developed the strategy of questioning the speaker in order to clarify their understanding.

There is some evidence that learning disabled children are less adept at monitoring their comprehension and hence, less likely to ask for clarification than their nonhandicapped peers. Kotsonis and Patterson (1980) found that learning disabled boys were less able to monitor their comprehension than nonhandicapped boys when playing a game similar to Candyland. The game was designed so that it was impossible to understand how to play the game until all the rules had been given. The learning disabled boys were less aware of the amount of information needed before the game could make sense. Bos & Filip (1982, 1984) report a study in which learning disabled and nonhandicapped seventh graders read passages with incongruities. Although learning disabled students were able to note the incongruities when given probes, the nonhandicapped students were much more proficient at spontaneously noting inconsistencies. Bos & Filip suggest that some learning disabled children do not monitor their comprehension because the children are inactive learners. This is consistent with the growing body of research that describes learning disabled

children as having a passive approach to learning; learning disabled children fail to spontaneously use strategies to help themselves process information (e.g. rehearsing or chunking information to aid recall).

Fear Inhibits Asking for Clarification

Older children are frequently aware of the process of asking for clarification but fear can inhibit them from freely making requests. As children mature many are afraid that their questions will be considered stupid by their classmates and/or teachers because they have experienced negative reactions when they have asked questions in the past. This is especially true for learning disabled children. If an individual hesitates in asking a question and continues to think about the question, fear frequently mounts in the interim. When the question is finally asked the person is very conscious that he is speaking. The chances are greater that the person will stutter or that the words will come out twisted because of the increased anxiety. Because of his imperfect performance he will be less likely to ask questions in the future.

School Variables

Teaching the skill of asking for clarification is usually not part of the standard school curriculum. The skill has received little attention in college method classes or at inservice sessions. Hence, many teachers are unaware of the importance of trying to increase children's facility with this process. They do not provide directed

learning activities that are designed to develop the ability of when and how to request clarification. Many teachers focus on increasing the rote skills of decoding and computation and ignore the development of more complex thinking skills. They assume that children will pick up thinking skills (including the ability to request clarification) on their own. Unfortunately, this is frequently not the case, especially for children with learning disabilities who need direct instruction to obtain such skills.

In addition, some teachers discourage children from asking for clarification. This is done both purposefully and inadvertently. Some teachers do not want their lessons interrupted and communicate this information directly. Others might think they are open to requests for clarification but through body language (folded arms, stiff posture, frowning) give the message that they do not want to be interrupted.

INCREASING CHILDREN'S SKILLS IN ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION

What can be done to increase children's skills in asking for clarification? The following suggestions have proved successful with learning disabled children between the ages of eight and eleven who attended a resource room for one hour a day. All children had average intelligence and were assessed as having oral language problems.

Increasing Facility with Question Froms

For some children it is necessary to first increase their ability to use mature (i.e., "adult") question forms. This can be done with

a variety of activities. The game "Twenty Questions" is helpful in accomplishing this goal. The teacher works with a small group of children and asks one child to choose an object in the room while the rest try to determine the identity of the object by asking questions. The teacher asks questions first in order to model "good" questioning. Another activity geared at increasing the use of question forms is writing the answer to a question on the chalkboard and having the children think of the question. A third activity for generating question asking is derived from Bryan et al. (1981) who had children act as talk show hosts. Children thought of appropriate questions and then interviewed their classmates using those questions.

Referential Communication Tasks

For children who readily use adult question forms referential communication tasks can be used to develop the skill of knowing when and how to ask for clarification. Referential communication, one of the earliest functions of communication, consists of talking about objects and events that are present (Bryen, 1982). In a typical referential communication task a visual barrier is placed between two individuals, one designated the speaker and the other the listener. It is the speaker's task to design a message that will allow the listener to identify a target stimulus from among on array of alternatives. Communication is totally dependent on the verbal message since the visual barrier prevents eye contact and nonverbal cues.

There are many variations in using the referential communication model. The most common are:

(1) Speaker describes picture and listener identifies picture from an array of several pictures.

(2) Speaker describes a three dimensional structure and listener builds structure with blocks or other building materials.

(3) Speaker describes design and listener draws design.

A wide variety of types of pictures have been used including animals, people, and abstract designs. Usually the pictures within a set vary by one or more distinguishing features such as size, color, or position in space. With tasks that involve building three dimensional structures, the structure can be built by an adult observer or it can be designed by the child speaker. One commercial kit includes several referential communication activities which involve having the child in the listener role draw a figure that the speaker describes. Unfortunately, the visual memory and motor skills of some children interfere with their ability to carry out the drawing tasks.

Referential communication activities best suited for increasing the skill of asking for clarification are designed so that the listener must be an active participant. Since young listeners are frequently not critical appraisers of the messages they receive, it is important to select tasks which require that the listener monitor his comprehension closely. The task should be easy enough so that the child knows if he understands. I have found that building structures and using pictures of concrete objects (as opposed to abstract designs) work best. The teacher needs to demonstrate that requesting clarification is necessary to successfully carry out the task. This can be done through modeling and purposefully giving inadequate messages.

The technique of modeling has been used to increase the skill of requesting clarification of both nonhandicapped (Ironsmith &

Whitehead, 1978) and learning disabled children (Kidder, 1980). Teachers can model asking for clarification by playing the listener role in a referential communication task. When the child-speaker gives an inadequate description (which is frequently the case) the teacher asks for clarification. It is best if she ask specific, direct questions as opposed to general, vague requests (e.g. "Which color did you say?" is much more specific than "I don't get it. Tell me again."). If the child's description is not ambiguous the teacher can still legitimately model asking for clarification in order to check to see if she understood correctly (e.g., "Let's see. I want to make sure I understand what you are saying. Did you say to put a blue block on top of the red block?").

After several trials with the teacher playing the listener role the teacher and child trade positions. The teacher then tells the child that sometimes her description might be incomplete and emphasizes that the child should ask questions if he does not understand a message. The teacher then gives inadequate descriptions (e.g., the description, "Show me the little pig" is given to describe the target picture "a little, blue pig" which must be distinguished from "a little, red pig").

I have found that after a few lessons with modeling and ambiguous descriptions learning disabled children are able to generalize the process and will continue to request information when playing referential communication games with other speakers (both children and adults) and with a variety of stimulus materials.

SUMMING UP

Children need to be assured that it is all right to ask questions. They need to realize that the instructions that teachers and other adults give are not always clear; it might not be their fault if they do not understand. Many children, especially learning disabled children, need formal instruction in how to ask for clarification. Referential communication tasks are effective at increasing this skill especially when used in conjunction with modeling and purposefully giving ambiguous directions. Finally, children need an opportunity to practice asking for clarification.

Requesting clarification is a very important thinking skill. Unfortunately, many learning disabled children have not developed this skill and will not pick it up on their own. The resource room teacher or learning disability specialist is in an unique position to develop this skill. Working with children individually or in small groups the resource room teacher can initially teach children how and when to ask for clarification. In addition, she can consult with classroom teachers to help them become aware of the importance of this skill, give suggestions on how to include appropriate training in their curriculum, and help children generalize the skill to larger group situations.

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Appendix

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